



# INTO THE VALLEY & OTHER.

a voiceHOUSE experience

a



across the street there, from the pizza place, well the owner he usually cleans up the sidewalk on his side, he shovels the sidewalk there in front of the store, down most of the block, all the way to Bonnie's, so I only have to worry about the other side of the street, but anyways it's so tight, and I couldn't get in there with the machine, it can't get on track, so I had to push it for about two blocks, I shoveled there, threw some salt, but it was fine, my back needed a break from the truck anyways. So I didn't end up using the thing once.

-I ended up doing about three or four blocks over at Five Points, but the damn thing jammed on me and I was so fed up with trying to fix it I just went out with the shovel, too. But that was towards the end of the run.

-You bring it in for maintenance?

-Yeah I dropped it off at the shed and threw a sticker on it.

-Damn thing always jams when you need it most.

-That's the truth. Your back feeling alright then?

-I ever tell you what my father always said to me? He said you know Rusty you'll be okay, you got a strong back and you got a thick skull, he used to say that, worked at the harbor unloading freight for fifty years, tough bastard. I didn't want anything to do with the harbor. I'll take the truck and the shovel.

-No kidding. Hey, did you end up getting any calls from Morty on the radio?

-Did I ever! Old Morty was lighting me up all night, boy he was after it, ever since they let him on the two-way channel, I swear to God, he's calling me every half hour, asking you know about do we got a tow, do we got a tow, he's trying to cash a tow fee like his life's depending on it. You know I ain't seen anything on the residential there, around Division, between Pine and Hickory is where folks usually forget, but no, not last night, no, everyone was off the street where the signs were. Was he barking your way too?

-He sure was, he was all over the radio, asking the same, you got a tow, you got a tow yet, and finally I saw one I put him on, near, where was it, on Prospect, over there by the Tops, I saw a wagon out there so I gave him one, he got one of his boys out on it in a hurry. He sure was looking to snatch 'em up last night.

-Must be saving up for a divorce.

-Either that or he owes a bookie.

And their voices fade out like the grating plow blades down a winter's avenue in a frozen light, the wind bellowing waves of flurries and dust along the sidewalk, fading, and I can barely hear them, whiteout conditions, radio chatter, but I notice his hand inside his pocket, the young man, he's walked out of the breakroom, he's rubbing a pill inside his pocket between his finger and his thumb, a white pill, with a tension in the way he massages the pill between his fingers, he's tense because this is the last of his pills, he knows it, and I know he's down to his last pill, then a new voice

-Bad news boys, just checked the messages on the answering machine, Cindy in payroll is out this morning, and the supervisor over at city told me I can't cut the checks without approval, so we can't cut them until tomorrow. With the storm and all she had to call out, so I'll write you both receipts for the time and tomorrow we should be able to clear it, Cindy oughtta be back. So you boys swing back tomorrow and we'll make sure you're settled.

And the news is bad, it's bad news, and I can sense it in the slouch of his downcast eyes that his stomach is dropping inside of him, it's a feeling of free fall, dropping out from underneath his feet like the floor disappeared, and the younger man pinches his face inward as he waits for his slip to be handed to him, then he nods politely, he doesn't say anything or protest as he takes the slip of paper from the woman behind the counter, he stares at it before casual goodbyes unfold between the older man who wears a nametag 'RUSTY' on his uniform shirt and the younger man who is already buttoned up in his coat and the woman at the counter who chews at her noisy gum, it won't be long before they meet again, soon, they're sure of it, but in case they don't, in case the weathermen are wrong, so long and Merry Christmas, though it's likely within a couple of days they'll all be back here, another overnight shift, snow in the forecast, it's nearly certain

And the younger man holds a pain inside him which clouds him from hearing the exact words of the older man and the woman, but somehow he knows what they're saying and he looks up from the slip to say goodbye and good morning

And here I am, again, to participate in this kind of a requiem, returning to the Department of Public Works

And I confront his pain each time I return, when I return to the glass swirls of a frozen lake surface, this Tuesday morning in December before I was born

And his pain acts like an eclipse across the landscape

And the pain awakens me, like the cold

And the younger man walks through the door, out the glass door past the parking lot to the sidewalk, he's underneath a sky of milky white because the sky has boiled over like a sauce pan and the purples and blacks of night have been shed away though she hasn't settled down into her natural state of blue, a dawn to end the night, with the faintest of molten glows at the edge of the horizon

And I have found no repose

And the pill is lodged in his pocket and he's breathing out a cloud of vapor from his nostrils and I can see the frozen light of the morning reflecting up from the mounds of fresh snow off his bright blue eyes, no longer opiated and pinned, a cut of sparkles, his pupils are full, I watch the light shimmer from off his black pupils as he's walking briskly towards a bus stop, he covers his eyes with his hands as he walks, because now as brightness marks the morning and he's been awake through most of the night his eyes aren't adjusted

And he had figured snow would be a reliable way to make an income, a steady job, because it snowed four or five months out of the year, so when his second cousin secured him a job with the union as a plow man he was content, because it would keep him busy, it would keep him fed, it would be as good a way as any to make a living, to do right, he was no college boy or businessman but he could work and show up on time with a clock punch and to boot the benefits were alright

And it will be a bus ride home, back to his apartment with one last pill in his pocket between his fingers, the sound of plaintive air brakes  
And I'll watch him step on the bus, with his chin pointed down tucked to his chest, now with a quarter in between his fingers, briefly replacing the pill, the quarter will fall into the machine where the driver sits, the machine will beep, the driver will flash up at the young man who wears a high visibility jacket, the driver will recognize him as a city employee, the bright green color of the young man's jacket, like a car honking at an intersection, the city emblem printed on the right shoulder, and the young man will acknowledge the driver, two city workers, a nod between them, a frozen Tuesday morning and the route is clear so now the buses will run, so now everyone can head to work, everyone packed onto the bus, he'll turn down the aisle and there will only be room for the young man to stand, the plastic seats and benches are occupied, his hand gripping a handhold, everyone in their coats and hats and scarves and gloves, lunch pails and briefcases, out to brave the day, out to combat the remnants of the blizzard from last night, and some of them will wish the plows hadn't been able to clear the roads, they'll wish work was cancelled, but the heartbeat of the city beats on, the driver drives, the quarters clink in the machine, the riders sit and stand, it's Tuesday and if you want to cover the electricity bill you have to make a paycheck so you'd better haul yourself to the bus stop and show up for your shift on time with everyone else

And it's cold on the bus and each of their noses are raw flesh  
And so he closes his eyes, I watch him shut his eyelids, another rider yanks on the cord and a bell sounds, a signal for the driver to pull over at the next stop, someone is disembarking, and the sky isn't layered in colors anymore, the sky is bright and aching now with an orange sun which barely clears the horizon because the storm has rolled on from off the lake, for now it has passed over the city

And an older woman seated next to him facing the east covers her face, the sun washes in between buildings which run in a row along the opposite side of the street, blinded, the sun electrifies the frozen sky through a clearing in the buildings and I see her open her palm and set it above her eyebrows, while the young man simply keeps his eyes shut, his eyes are closed and I can feel the pain inside of him because the pill in his pocket is his last pill and there's no more money, anywhere, and he'll be sick tonight without another pill, sweating, his skin crawling, wet paper and wood nails and a noose, even though he's warmed by the sunlight on his cheeks

And the contrast between his pain and the brightness of the sun glaring in from the east

And the sunlight reminds me of something

And the trees along the street, I can't help but appreciate the contorted branches of the trees along the street, because the grey trees are somehow more beautiful when they are stripped of their leaves, nothing but bones, some things are more beautiful when they are naked, empty

And the trees remind me of something

And beyond the trees sits a cathedral, the stones of the cathedral dusty with snow, silent

And you can make any place look beautiful if you wash it in a frozen morning of December light

And whispering snowfall

And his eyes are closed while I gaze out the window at the trees and the sunlight and I begin to remember

And then another passenger yanks the cord, so the bus draws to a stop, again, it stops and then it picks back up in a fit, it starts and stops and the young man's eyes remain closed for most of the ride back, the bus thins out as the line draws near, the end of the line, and the bus will circle back towards the city, with more commuters, with more workers, with more quarters in the machine, but he'll be in agony, swallowed in pain, walking off through the sliding doors after the hydraulics settle, as the bus sinks in towards the asphalt cracking in a hiss with the salt and ice, the sliding doors will open for him so he'll lunge off the step to head north for a block, then west, and in his breast pocket inside of his jacket are keys, he'll open the zipper on his pocket and then insert the keys into a heavy wooden door

And up a stairwell inside his apartment he washes his face and his hands in a bathroom, and his reflection is shining bright, he rubs his eyes, and I can't help but notice the size of the toothpaste on the sink, whenever we're here I take note of the size of the tube of toothpaste, and I consider the truth of why he hadn't bought a full size tube of toothpaste at the pharmacy

And he walks from the bathroom into the open space of the studio apartment, between the kitchen and where his bed is folded up into the wall, he finds a seat at the small table, the table and the chair, he's at the chair removing his boots as he faces the couch and the small television And I consider the heartbreak of the size of the toothpaste tube on the sink while he rubs his feet, I envision him paused along one of the aisles at the Rite Aid Pharmacy, stopping to consider, then he reaches down for the smallest tube of toothpaste not only because it is the cheapest available but also because he might not be around long enough to finish the XTRAVALEUE size tube, so why waste it

And there's a cathedral dusted in snow, and the sun has risen above the naked trees, and the sky has coagulated into a piercing blue so the morning is here, only a week until Christmas

And he stands up and paces between the kitchen and the couch, and his face is strained, he's shirtless, a tattoo on his left shoulder, there

are factions of direction and decision warring across the poles of his psyche but I can't touch his thoughts I can only draw from the tension on his face and the sweat on his brow, desperate, hopeless, like the printed faces of children on milk cartons

And his green coat hangs patiently off the back of the chair, the single chair at the card table

And the young man suddenly presses a telephone to his ear, because he hears something

-I could flip you a gram for one of those pills.

-How much is that good for?

-If you slam it? Two or three hits, easy.

-And you've got clean gear?

-Sure, I got plenty. I'll fix you up, show you how it's done. On the house.

-Just like that?

-Just like that.

And a pause opens up on the phone, the pause between breaths, the pause before a couple reaches climax, the pause after the lightning flashes, before thunder fills a cloudless sky, before a wave breaks, before a newborn wails, before a trigger is pulled, the pause on the phone with his dry lips cracking, the pause on the phone with his nose scrunched up towards his brow, the pause before he sighs, the pause before he decides, it's the space of a silence which opens up to the place where we come from and where we'll go, liminal, the infinite encircled around us on all sides yet somehow impossible to understand or touch or concern ourselves with except in that pause, a storm beyond the horizon, it's the place between places, before an entire world collapses and another emerges, the pause where both worlds simultaneously exist, where everything is possible

And I always seem to wait here, in this pause, with the languid phone cord and the handset pressed to his ear and the frayed wire plugged into the jack in the wall, even though I know how it turns out, even though I have witnessed the ending, I wait here with him in this pause because even though I know it's impossible, I feel like it might be, like this might be the moment he changes his mind, like this might be the pause which forces him to reconsider, which allows him some clarity, affords him a chance

And I wait with him here in this moment

And I want to break the curse of fate

And I pray this time is different

And my mother used to tell me stories about the young man, she used to say people said it was an accident, he made a mistake and sometimes if you make a mistake you don't have the opportunity to set it right, but people didn't know, people didn't understand what life had done to him, she knew her brother, she knew his soul, and it was the only way out for him, so as sad as it made her, she never held it against him, she understood

And Mommy used to tell me he was the most haunted, bittersweet person she had ever known

-He wasn't as tough as you are. And he was desperate. When you're desperate, you make desperate decisions.

And then he decides, he makes the decision

-I'll be over.

-Hit the buzzer to let me know when you're out front.

And once my mother explained to me if he had been a tree, her brother, a massive burl would have marked the base of his trunk, because of what happened, a scar, a marking, Cain's sign for the life ahead of him, marked by the lives behind him, sufferers, tortured, but it wasn't the burl she would remember, it wasn't the twisted bark or disfigurement, it wasn't the wound, it was the growth above the burl, the trunk continuing, sprouting arms and fingers of branches, the fact he had kept going, he reached further, pointed heavenwards, hungry for sunlight  
And I never fully understood my mother, what she told me, because I couldn't quite understand it, but I very much understand it now

-I loved him. And I miss him. I really miss him.

And she said this once after I had asked her why she was crying

-Why are you crying, Mommy?

And some trees are felled, while others are fallen

And when she responds to me, as she finishes her words, with the tears on her cheek, she reaches out to me, and I watch her part a strand of my hair with her hand, she cherishes me by placing the strand behind my ear and everything in her touch tells me everything in her heart, she says everything she could have ever possibly said to me without saying it, because of her gentleness and her gaze and her breathing, the warmth of her hand, she says it all, she tells me I am her heart, I am her angel, even though she believes her brother ran out of angels, even though I once asked her 'Mommy where have all the angels gone?' and she didn't know how to answer me, because a teacher had taught us about angels in Sunday School, and I found out about angels that way, and I so dearly wished to find an angel, but not my guardian angel, an angel for my Mommy, because I had been taught what Sunday School teachers say about angels, angels are protectors who prevent harm from coming upon you, so I wanted to find a guardian angel for my Mommy, to catch one, and I tried to pray and I tried to watch out for signs of angels but I couldn't find one, and I asked my Mommy what happened to the angels, because I was a little girl, only six years old, and I wanted to know where the angels had gone

And Mommy moves the strand of hair across my bangs, across my forehead and behind my ear, and I watch her pull my tiny figure up to her, onto the couch where she sat cross legged, the couch in our living room, the worn out pink couch in our living room, our sole piece of furniture, I watch her hoist me up to her and into her lap and press her chin against the top of my head and wrap her arms around me

And I understand what she's saying to me, what she says to me without saying it, she's telling me I've answered my own question, because simply

by being with her, being who I was, being me, it was enough for my mother to believe in angels, it made it clear to her angels were real and among us and weren't restricted to other dimensions or imaginary places or old books, and you didn't need special glasses or prayers or magic to see them, because I was here, with her, and so angels were real, she told me without saying it I was her angel, proof enough

And I'm not worried about whether angels exist or not anymore, but I'm afraid we're more like ghosts with little in the way of powers or protection, so I wonder what good is an angel, if she can't perform miracles

And I want desperately to snatch the pill out from his worn pocket, but I can't

And I want to flush the baggie of white powder at his dealer's house down a toilet, but I can't

And I want to be more for them, for her, for him, but I can't

And though I've never seen a demon, that doesn't prove anything, and doesn't guarantee they aren't lurking around somewhere

And I've tried different ways, over and over, but I haven't been able to make a difference, there's nothing I can do, because the young man can't see me, he can't touch me, he can't hear me, so I'm frozen in a vision, with him, which is the vision of a past passed by long ago for good, except here I am, as it passes by again and again, always passing the same way, and it's not a dream in the way dreams feel different than waking life, no, it's a life lived, a lived life, and I know because I had once been alive, and lived

And even though I know it's no good, I try, I try to reach out, I try to shout, I try to make myself known but there's no presence for me to point him towards, there are no lips or arms or fingers at my disposal, but I keep straining, like a baby unable to be born, as he ties up his boots, with the pill in his pocket, as he collects his keys and his wallet, I try, as he looks back, and his last look back over the apartment, his final glance back

And he locks the door

And he's gone

And I've lost him

And I wonder if I've been cast down into some kind of hell

And it seems to me, now, that our movement through time is less propulsion, and more attraction, because events out in the future seem to draw us towards them, as much as our past seems to create finite splits in direction and limits where we can go, even though our past seems to define who we are, our lives are pulled into the future, our futures define what we will be, and so what does yesterday really matter

And so if that is the case, I wonder why I'm here

And I am stationed disembodied at the window of a young man's apartment looking down at him as he moves along the street, watching his feet underneath him, the snow and the salt underneath his feet, he is tall and handsome and his coat is stitched black leather and his pants are

frayed black denim and clouds of mist spurt out and mark his wake as he exhales through the frozen morning air

And I am alone in his cavern, his cave of darkness, lonely, dark, even though nothing of me is here, no body, no mouth or eyes or hands, I'm here

And the cavern is as much mine as it was his

And a car passes by, obscuring my vision of my uncle

And there are rosary beads dangling from the car window

And there are voices in the car

-You were the one responsible, you do know that, don't you?

-How so?

-You didn't listen to him! You didn't do anything about what happened to him!

-What happened to him?

-Exactly my point! You are still in denial! You refused to do anything about what he told you!

-It was a figment of his imagination.

-It was a figment of your imagination! You refused to believe your own son!

And the older woman doesn't respond to her daughter, so her daughter continues

-If Dad would have been alive, he would've strung that bastard up on a telephone pole and gutted him for what he did to our family, do you know that?

-This has nothing to do with your father being around.

-Actually, you're right! It has to do with you, and what you did. Or didn't do. Because that's what killed him. That's why he needed the pills. That's why he stuck a needle in his arm.

-It must be convenient for you, taking it out on me.

-Taking what out on you?

-Your frustration.

-You're damn right I'm frustrated. Ten years later and you still haven't accepted the truth.

-No, not that frustration.

-Then what? What is it? What frustration?

-You are a single parent, a silly girl who slept with a man you weren't married to, who committed a sin and now you have to live with your mistake.

-Have to live with my mistake? Are you talking about Angelina? Is she my mistake?

-Did you ever wonder why she was born the way she was?

-How was she born mom? What's wrong with Angelina?

-I'm not going to answer that question.

And I can see myself in the backseat of the Oldsmobile with the wooden rosary beads hanging down from the rearview mirror and my eyes are out the window but I'm listening to their words, Grandma and Mommy, I'm listening to them talk and I hear them say my name and the talking is

more of a yelling and a tightness winds up the words so the words are sharp and tight so I'm afriad

-You're the one who said it. What's wrong with her?

-It's not about her.

-So then it's about me? About me, and what I did?

And Grandma is driving the car and she reaches up for the rosary beads and slides them off the mirror and clutches them between her fingers of one hand while the other is at the large wheel of the dark beige Oldsmobile, and traffic clogs up at an intersection as a red light holds us in place with the other cars and the windows are rolled up because it's cold outside and the heat in the car doesn't quite work but Grandma can't afford to bring it in to be fixed so she'll have to make it another winter driving to work and driving to church and driving to the grocery store

And I can't understand what is happening, but I understand it much better now

-So it's about me? What I did? Of course! Because it can never be about you, right? It's never about what you did, right? Because you go to church and pray over your worry beads, your life was perfect, everything you did was perfect, right? Right?

And icicles are frozen onto mudflaps, the sun is a diffuse lamplight glowing hazy behind the gray blanket of the sky, a dim lamplight in an impossibly large room, sitting on top of us for three or four months out of the year, obscured, a light full of shadows, afternoon of day, of night

And the weathermen call for more snow in the evening

And I'm a little girl, delicate, with my socks and boots and mittens

And my mother is shouting across the front seat of a winter's afternoon, at Grandma, demanding the old woman drop us off

-Pull the car over. Pull it over. We don't need you anymore. I don't need this.

-Have it your way.

And it's the pain

And my brother died from an overdose

And my son died from an overdose

And my uncle died from an overdose

And each one of us is only a hearse ride away, six feet under the ground, three feet wide and eight feet long, even the undertakers

And the car pulls over and the front door swings open onto the sidewalk and my mother rushes to the back door and opens it and takes me by the hand, she unbuckles my safety belt and takes me by the hand and in her other hand is a bag of groceries and I am walking with her down the street, the two of us are walking down the street together in our coats and our wool hats, Mommy and me, fleeing along the cracked concrete and rock salt

And the parked car has two doors open, both on the passenger side

And her son is dead ten years today

And her husband is dead almost twenty years

And her father is dead almost fifty years  
And she was twelve years old when her father never came home from working  
at the mill  
And she had been married twelve years when her husband was killed in the  
car accident  
And her son was twenty-four when he plunged the needle in his arm  
And long years fill the insides of her eyes  
And longer days fill the insides of the rosary beads  
And the sky is gray and lonesome and even the light is full of shadows,  
a Tuesday afternoon in December, a passerby wincing as the wind blows  
through his jacket, the tread of tires, the light full of shadows  
And Grandma opens up her door and walks over to the sidewalk, where she  
politely closes the front door and the rear door, on the passenger side,  
before she walks back to the driver's side, with the rosary beads tucked  
into her hand so she takes a deep breath  
And I can't see inside of her thoughts but I can see inside of her eyes  
and she believes one day her daughter will apologize to her for what  
transpired  
And hopefully the apology comes before Christmas  
And her belief is what sustains her, it keeps her afloat, it keeps the  
entire world together, from crashing down on her, from pushing her off  
a ledge into a midnight abyss where nothing makes any sense and  
everything is terrible and scary and separated by the blackness of death  
because once someone you love dies you never see them again, belief  
prevents the undoing, unraveled by the chaos and the monsters and the  
empire of death  
And she is right, because she has to be right  
And she is hopeful because what else is there but hope  
And when the world is place for killing the people you love  
And nothing makes sense  
And the sacraments and the stories and the prayers make it true  
And what is a belief, is it a choice I make for myself, or is it a choice  
I make for you  
And when people profess they want to be born again, zealous, remade in  
the image and likeness of the Creator, a new creation, go to where I  
send thee, here am I, the new flesh of the new body of the new earth,  
don't they understand what is lost with the old, don't they understand  
what has to die, their personalities, their interests, their judgments  
and notions and thoughts, all of which they hold dear to their hearts,  
even their beliefs, erased, out with the floodwater, and what remains  
will be His, Him, a version of yourself which is not yourself, because  
you yourself are dust, gone, to be reborn in the spirit is to be reborn  
in Him, His vision, none of it is ours, we come here and express our  
moment and depart, we come into this life and hold onto nothing, we are  
owed nothing, the very fact of our existence is justification, our being  
is what matters and it is our reward, so in the end we lose, and in many  
ways all forms lead to no form, to God, the formless, the abyss is what  
we are called back to, it is what He is, silence, empty, and so many of

these born again Christians envision themselves in their Sunday best at the barbecue, but no, none of it is ours, loss marks everything  
And it can be liberating  
And it can be frightening  
And it can be overwhelming  
And you lose yourself, then reappear  
And Grandma clicks the keys into the car but before she turns the engine over her lips begin to move in a murmur of prayer to the Blessed Mother, for the souls of the departed, a bead for her father, the veteran of a World War, returning home to a job at Bethlehem Steel, a machinist in Shop No. 2, a stop at the tavern after his shift for a shot and a beer with the boys, bowling on Thursday nights, who bought his only daughter a new dress for Easter, velvet with ruffles at the shoulders, a dress she cherished, the last Easter before he died  
And she prays through the old neighborhood, her first crush, a boy named Joseph Krazimynski who the other kids named Joey Casablanca, with dark brown eyes, the fiercest eyes, those neighborhood gangs of Polish kids who delivered newspapers and bagged groceries  
And she prays through how the steel plant used to glow into the sky at night, how she'd look out at it from her bedroom window, how she'd look out at the reddish glow from her Aunt's window until her husband rescued her away to new windows, but it was the same reddish glow  
And she prays through how her Aunt Bertie threw away her collection of Easter dresses, the pile of them, under the lid of the trash can  
And she prays through her husband's hands, like her father's hands  
And so the next bead is for her husband, who died in an automobile accident when the children were so little, survived by a young daughter and a young son and a shattered wife, who worked his way up at the taxicab stand and owned several cars, who watched the city transition out of boomtown Americana, who predicted the factory would close, who planned a new life for them Upstate, who arrived home with fragrant bouquets and fresh bread and grinned in his easy chair with the football game on, his son on his lap, explaining the rules and the players' names and positions  
And she prays through her boy and her girl and their kitchen table and the fresh flowers in the vase and the gratitude, the peace in her heart, how her dreams had come true  
And she prays through the phone call from the hospital, telling her there was nothing they could do  
And the next bead, the afternoon her son told her about what happened at school  
And she prays through that final conversation, before he died, in her living room, her voice  
-You know I saw Anne Marie Murphy at church yesterday, she was there with her husband and her three little girls and she told me she was expecting another baby this spring, can you believe that?  
And her son doesn't say a word  
And she cannot recall the last thing her darling boy said to her

And in the end it had devolved into subtext between them, Grandma was effusive in her praise for my uncle's slightest gains because of how embarrassed she was, yet in the next breath she would make a comment or point out an observation to cut down his entire world and remind him of her utter disappointment

And it was his eyelids, they were always droopy, so Grandma couldn't help herself

And she is right because she has to be right

And the pain

And Mommy and I are walking down the street, with a bag of groceries, I'm shivering but Mommy says it's not much further to go, so cheer up, it's another adventure, it's a world full of adventure

And I know Grandma tried her best as the engine turns over

And we are all scared children

And what is it but pretend

And if angels are messengers, what is my message, and who am I supposed to deliver it to

And I can't help but sense it's the scarcity of love that makes the world a cold, awful place, if there was enough love to go around for everybody, if everybody who wanted love received it, then our problems would be solved, because it's the unloved, in our desperation, our unhealed sickness, longing for attention or companionship, a touch of skin, the lack of contact is what drives us to insane ends, the lack of understanding, these merciless ends, and it might be explained by one common cause, a lack of love, from a woman, or a man, from a friend, from a mother or a father, in the end we need love, we need to be loved, and there are plenty of us who need it, who want it but don't have it, there simply isn't enough of it to go around in the world, so maybe if God could fix one thing, when he set out with the recipe for this world, he should have added a little bit more love into the mix

And still there are no frontiers to the heart, because here is Mommy hoisting me up, holding me against her body, trudging and determined, with me in one arm and the groceries in the other, down the sidewalk, her cheeks are flushed and she is winsome with her full lips kissing me and promising warm milk and cocoa mix

And how can anybody know how they got to be this way

And what is it but muffled, muzzled desperation hidden by useless postures, prattle, even signs of the cross

And it's not sadness but it's something different when she hangs her head

And she can't put a finger on it, but it's stark against the relief of her personality, against the rest of her, whatever is left outside of the thing she can't put a finger on it

And I never saw Grandma's tears, because they were her secret

And sometimes after my mother had wept, usually in the bathroom, upset, she would firm herself up to decide that was the end of it, then we would head out for sundaes, we would walk to the Ridgeline Diner and she would order grilled cheese sandwiches and sundaes and I would lick the

chocolate sauce from off of the spoon and she would look at me in a way which helped me understand that even if there isn't enough love to go around in the world, I certainly received my fair cut of it  
And the Ridgeline Diner is where Mommy took me after Grandma had passed away

And I miss her

And I miss them all

And even though I'm here with them, watching them, when I come out of the darkness, they aren't here with me

And my uncle is down the street, out of sight

And Mommy grins at me as I hold the cherry stem between my forefinger and thumb, but then her attention shifts, past our booth, at two older women, hushed at the counter, on round stools which spin in both directions, both of the women are alone but they talking to each other, their floral patterns, their dyed hair, with cups of hot coffee so they blow meekly inside of the ceramic wells, the widowed and the forgotten and the rejected, scribbled notepads and 'Order Up!', my mother notices the two women at the diner

And Mommy realizes she never got a chance to say goodbye

And I wish I could do something, because what good is an angel who can't do anything, who will die of a pernicious heart defect not long after she turns seventeen years old, who will leave her Mommy to a world of madness, a world that kills everyone you love

And what can any of us do

And isn't it scared of dying

And God chose the foolish, the weak, the lowly, those who count for nothing

And Mommy never spoke a word about my father, as if he didn't exist, the man who loved her one night only to disappear the next morning, it was easy to see why, why he loved her, not why he disappeared, because my mother possessed dark brown eyebrows and rich brown eyes and fulsome blonde hair that tousled about in the most sensuous way, she'd push her curls up or twist a strand in her fingers, a silhouette of curls against a background of glowing light, he must have noticed her twisting a strand of her hair in a barroom, but he left her beauty never to return, so there hadn't been any memories for me to forget, my father didn't exist, it was nothing for me to remember, no patty-cake bouncing on laps or mountaintop rides on his shoulders, my father was nobody for Mommy to speak of, nothing for me to feel confused or conflicted about, which made it easier somehow, it was simple, very simple for me, because it was Mommy, only beautiful Mommy, she was all I had known, I never sensed I was missing anything, because I had Mommy, who was everything  
And I know it was different for her, because she felt like she was missing something, an emptiness

And that night, with my father, she was mourning her brother, she was scared to die, she wanted to feel alive, to feel love, to fill the void, to lose her body held in the arms of another

And I don't know if we ever find it

And if we manage to, we probably don't realize it

And when Grandma towed me along to Sunday School Mommy would throw up her arms and argue it wasn't the old woman's place to inculcate me with religion, but I quite enjoyed the peace of the church, a repose, because even though I didn't understand what language the priest spoke or what the woman at the lectern sang I could tell the difference, I knew whatever it was they were saying it was nice, it wasn't like the kids at school with their insults, it wasn't like when Mommy and Grandma fought, it wasn't like anything on the television or the radio, I could sense a light and a space and the statue of the woman with the blue eyes I could tell she loved us and wanted the best for us and had special powers that could help us when we needed them

And I remember my mother the night before I died, the night before the morning of my last breath, I remember her stroking my cheeks and my hair, even though the tube was all the way down my throat, even though my eyes were closed, I could feel her, and I knew she was the lady with the blue eyes, so it would be alright

And I wasn't scared when I died

And I wasn't afraid to let go when it was time

And it's not forever or for long but just for now

And I was born with Down Syndrome to a beautiful woman who I called Mommy for seventeen years then I fell asleep and disappeared only to return back, back to haunt an uncle I never knew, back with a perspective and a clarity and the words I always wanted to use when I was alive but had difficulty finding

And his blue eyes remind me of her

And when I fell asleep forever I wasn't worried because I knew whatever happened Mommy would be there to find me, and love me

And a little girl looks up at the sun from a sidewalk of ashes

And a mother loses her daughter

And suddenly Mommy is asleep on a couch, she is an old woman, and it's not the pink couch she's asleep on, she's sleeping on a new sofa, she's asleep and the windows are open and the sound of waves lull through the screens of the porch because the condominium is on the water and her husband is at out so she's asleep in the afternoon with her legs curled up and her eyes closed

And she reminds me of Grandma

And she had been pushing around a shopping cart at a grocery store, and when she returned her cart to the designated station, she noticed the plastic seat for where a child might sit and she thought about me

And she thinks about me all the time

And I'm not with her while she's without me, but I am

And when it came time for Mommy to find me a job, with the neighborhood declining into a state of decay, the stores closing, the FOR SALE signs, it was difficult, but she managed to convince the owner of a supermarket to bring me on, to help bag groceries for customers, to help retrieve the rickety carts strewn across an asphalt lot and tie them together in long trains of despair

And I remember everyone with their brown paper bags, their burdens  
And I remember Jake the fish monger who would show toddlers and small  
children the lobsters in the tank, the kids with their mothers, Jake  
would roll up his sleeves and reach inside, hoisting the shelled  
creatures up, making them dance on the counter, doing funny voices  
And our city was falling apart, but it didn't feel like it to me  
And over at Chef's Restaurant, the light was on, the sign which read  
'Banquet in Progress,' blinking gold and silver, while the parking lot  
stood empty and bleak, without even a single car  
And the tempered glass in the factory windows is broken into small  
pebbles, littering the sidewalk  
And graffiti runs along the entire brick wall  
And the door wears a padlock, and a chain  
And quiet smokestacks  
And an old man with a scraggly beard can't feel his feet or his fingers  
anymore  
And our city is fallen apart  
And so the last will be first, and the first last  
And I can feel the dreams and lost hope inside my mother as she pulls  
her hands up to her chin, her hair still curly but no longer blonde, the  
tides lazy outside along the coastline, oh how everything we love slips  
away, is turned into a memory, transformed into a kind of charcoal, Mommy  
will rise to be awake with a handful of charcoal and a feeling of loss  
because the brightness is gone, the light in the life of things, it is  
gone, no difference the man I love home to sit beside me, the condominium  
we share with its private walkway to the beach, no matter the restaurants  
or cocktails, the easier my life has become the less light I can see,  
because it's not the comfort that matters, the comfortability, my hands  
are covered in black soot, and I'd trade the comforts away to return,  
to go back to those bleak mornings, a stack of unpaid bills, to that  
savage darkness all around us, to my baby girl, because she was my light,  
held before me, and how the light would shine in the darkness, in the  
agony of those uncertain years and those painful moments the light shined  
far brighter than it does now, losing her, my sweet girl, every morning  
I wake up without her I miss her more, the pain never goes away, I'll  
never grow accustomed to it, this glittering life without light, time  
heals nothing  
And I watch Mommy sleeping on the couch, wishing  
And if I had eyes, I would be crying  
And if I had arms, I would hug her  
And if I had lips, I would tell her  
And we don't become accustomed, inured to the heartbreak, no, it's mostly  
the opposite  
And she wakes up in our apartment bedroom, the room is dark and cold,  
her nose is red, plows run outside along the streets and her first  
thoughts turn to me, I hope my baby is warm under the blankets, I plugged  
in the space heater so she should be cozy, down the hall, in the room  
with the radiator that worked, my darling, my flicker of light, asleep

and dreaming so soon she'll wake up to tell me about her dreams because her dreams are a wonder to her, her dreams are like her soul, perfect and clear, shimmering, and she'll rhyme a couplet for me at the breakfast nook, about a minute and an hour, about a snowflake and a flower, because she is my snow flower, she is the poetry of my heart, she's given me so much more than I ever have asked for, an ode to sweetness, to purity, a kiss upon her forehead and I am broke and cold and alone but I am whole, I have never been more complete because of her

And Mommy, I love you

And Mommy, I'm here

And she'll want to believe it when she wakes up on the couch, after all these years, she'll want to believe I've been with her, her daughter, she'll consider how long it's been, it's getting so long it feels like it happened to somebody else, the old apartment, the job at the supermarket, the sundaes at the Ridgeline, the movie theaters, the double shifts at work, the bills and the school district and the bus passes, then the hospital, the funeral, it feels like I wasn't even the one there, it feels like Angelina is a ghost

And she's standing over her baby's casket

And her hands covered in charcoal

And then a ring of keys, the door opening

And it might be over soon

And a voice

-How are you sweetheart?

-I'm alright. Dozing off. How was your golf?

-The golf itself, well, better left unspoken. I played with a young man from Boston and his father. They were a fun pair. It was good to see a boy grown up sharing time with his father. It was heartwarming, it really was, but in a way it made me sad. It made me wish I had a boy like that, and then I thought of you, and your daughter, and so it was, I got emotional in the car driving home. I managed to keep the tears off the course at least. But it all makes you wonder, doesn't it?

-It sure does.

-And I know today is a difficult day for you, even after all these years, with your brother, so I didn't want to mention it. But then I kept thinking, in the car on the drive back, for everything I didn't get in my life, I'll tell you what, I'm sure glad I got you at the end.

-I am too.

-I really am. I want you to know that.

-I do.

And a kind man sits himself next to her on the couch and hugs her and kisses her forehead and even though I can't smile I'm smiling because the happiness inside of me, seeing Mommy with a man who loves her, who cares for her, who treats her the way she deserves

And even though she could never believe in Grandma's church, she could never bring herself back to sing the songs or slowly pace in a procession up the aisle for communion, she also couldn't believe in the cold ways of the world, the men of science who wrote textbooks about why angels

couldn't be real, why angels were make believe things made up by silly people who couldn't stand on their own two feet, those men and their textbooks who thought they were doing everyone a big favor, stressing the importance of reason and logic, denying the possibility of wonder, of wonderful things, telling us angels were made up

And she doesn't know what to believe anymore, but she wants to believe I'm here with her

And I am

And she never spoke with Grandma again, after she pulled me out of the backseat with the bag of groceries in her other hand, a kind of Judgement Day for them, because when Grandma passed away she had nothing to do with saying goodbye, she hired an attorney and never once mentioned it to me

And I would ask her sometimes, "Mommy, where's Grandma?"

And she regrets it

And life is nothing but a tragic series of mistakes, so who could believe in anything

And despite the mistakes, sometimes we do right

And how much she loved him, her brother, how she would make a point to hug him and kiss him on the cheek, her tortured older brother, because whenever she saw him she hugged him and kissed his cheek because she knew he needed it, he was tired and he needed someone to reach out to him and hug him and tell him he was loved

And she doesn't know what to believe anymore, but she wants to believe he's with her here, too

And I don't know if he is, but it wouldn't surprise me

And it might not have been a darkness, where I came from, it may have been a light, a light so bright that it washed away every color, like a blackness in a way, so strong and powerful, it washed over me in the hospital, and that's where I seem to return, to finish this elegy

And soon it will take me back

And it's not so much we are alive and live or we are dead and die, living and dying, it's less about the definition between one or the other, and it's more about how the coming and going never stops

And the journey

And even though I miss them and love them, and wish they could see me, wish I could do something more for them, even though I feel it inside of me deeper down beyond that I know it isn't home, it isn't where I belong, it isn't what I am intended to do

And it doesn't hurt any less, knowing that

And love will never find us, though love will find a way

And patience is all we have, but it will kill us all someday

And a little girl smiles

And a young woman smiles

And an old woman smiles

**BACK HOME**

It was the way my brother smiled as his picture was being taken, that's when I first decided.

He was standing behind Mary Pat's wheelchair with his wife next to him on one side and the pastor on the other, the four of them looking towards a camera.

The service had ended.

Mary Pat had read a short letter before the final blessing, a 'thank you' of sorts to the pastor, who was celebrating his last Christmas Mass on account of a transfer to a new diocese after the holidays.

Now they were all having their picture taken, but I only watched my brother's face, and his smile.

A children's choir had performed several festive songs during the course of the celebration and now families dotted the aisles, reuniting, parents and children, suit coats and white tights.

I stood alone in a pew and watched my brother smile.

Little girls laughed and old men shook hands and I stood with my coat on, holding my gloves and my scarf, watching my older brother and his family.

I hadn't been back home for Christmas in five years.

It had been longer since I had been inside of a church.

I bit my cheek when the photographer offered a thumbs up and my brother and his wife and Mary Pat made their way from off the altar towards the back of the church where I was standing.

I smirked and exhaled sharply.

During the homily, the pastor adamantly reminded us in the congregation of the fact this was a world that couldn't save itself. We couldn't do it on our own. We needed help.

As I watched my brother slowly push Mary Pat towards the back of the church I thought about his smile for the picture and I thought about the pastor's homily and I made up my mind about everything.

Stuck in the old neighborhood.

Listening to the same old stories.

But then it was difficult to think much more on what I had noticed, with the families talking in the aisles screaming and laughing and shaking hands, so I glanced down to check my watch on my wrist.

We left the church and drove to my brother's house.

After dinner my brother excused us from the table. We left with our drinks in hand and my brother led me to his garage for a cigar. He had arranged a sofa couch, a mini-fridge and a television next to the tool bench. Nearby were some lifting weights and a bench press. On the wall hung baseball pennants.

It was nearly identical to how our old man had organized his garage.

My brother pulled a cord on a tiny lamp. He handed me a cigar and some matches, then we both sat down on the couch.

I lit the end of the cigar he handed me, "All you're missing is a couple of bowling league trophies."

I was thinking about why some sons turn into their fathers, and why other sons do everything they can to be different.

My brother considered it before, "Was never much of a bowler."  
I handed the book of matches back to my brother. His hands were larger than mine. He stood taller than me, his shoulders wider. He resembled my father. I looked more like my mother's father, our grandfather, wiry, pointed.

"It was a nice meal."

"It was."

I smoked, thinking about my niece, Mary Pat. She is twelve years old now. When I had last seen her, things had been different. She couldn't talk without a great deal of difficulty. After the visit ended and I left, I couldn't forget her tragic groaning, like an obstructed windpipe, how strenuous it had been for her to vocalize words and simple phrases. Admittedly I had been worried about the groaning as I prepared for this visit, but she seemed to have grown out of it. It was a relief. Her groaning had made me very uncomfortable.

"She did really well tonight, Mary Pat, reading her letter there at the end of mass to the pastor."

"She must have been practicing for a month."

"Well it paid off."

Last time I visited, my brother said how Mary Pat was such a smart girl, how sad it made him for her to struggle with her words.

My brother considered it before, "She was concerned about being able to hold a microphone, so she would use a banana, she would pretend a banana was the microphone when she practiced."

My brother grinned.

It was very different than the smile I noticed earlier in the evening. When my brother grinned, you couldn't help but grin yourself.

He was that kind of man.

Like my father.

He was a big, tough looking man who you'd have guessed never once laughed or grinned or had any kind of fun, so when you saw him grin or laugh or have any kind of fun, it really meant something.

My brother grinned and so I grinned unconsciously.

"Stacy thought of it, to use the banana."

He shook his head, then he stopped grinning.

My sister-in-law had become an advocate for handicap accessibility and construction laws. She quit her job as a paralegal, in one of the city's top law offices, and started working with a non-profit, fighting for the rights of her daughter, for other disabled people.

On her first day of school, in kindergarten, Mary Pat couldn't make it with her wheelchair into her classroom. The door was too narrow. After that, my sister-in-law quit her job.

"You must be proud of her. She's come a long way since I was last here."

"Nothing is going to come easy for that kid, but she's a fighter."

Silence like the lilting smoke between us, I looked down at the glowing end of the cigar and reached for my drink.

I inhaled a puff, thinking about my brother's life, the look on his face in the garage, his eyes pointed downward.

It came out of me without any thought. "Are you doing alright?"  
"How do you mean?"  
"Just, in general."  
"In general, sure, I'm doing alright."  
"You don't have to say anything because I'm asking."  
"I appreciate that. Because I don't have anything to say."  
"I'm asking because I'm your brother."  
"So you're asking because you have to?"  
"For Christ sakes. I was only trying to open up a little. See how you were, how things were with you. See if you wanted to talk about anything."  
"What gave you the impression I wanted to talk about something?"  
"I don't know."  
"Must have been something I said, or something you saw."  
I took another puff of smoke from off the cigar. I didn't care much for the taste but I knew my brother liked to have a cigar for special occasions, so why turn him down.  
Just like my father.  
"Forget it."  
"Or maybe it's everything."  
"I said forget it."  
"Maybe it's Mary Pat and her wheelchair, maybe it's the worn down church, maybe it's the overcooked beef on the table, maybe it's the rusted truck, maybe it's the old carpeting. What was it? Or was it a little bit of everything?"  
I didn't say a word.  
A draft of cold air flooded in from under the garage door.  
My brother took a puff on his cigar.  
"Ever since you showed up, you've look at me like I'm a condemned man."  
"A condemned man?"  
"A condemned man."  
I felt a tension and I couldn't help but think back about our skirmishes as kids, how we would fight in the yard, in the basement, how I'd try to outmaneuver him, avoiding his headlocks.  
Then my brother leaned forward, opened up the refrigerator, pulled out two bottles of beer, and closed it back up. He twisted the caps off the bottles then handed one to me.  
"Merry Christmas."  
"Merry Christmas."  
I took a drink, after our bottles clinked together, and I let my eyes fall on the work bench.  
I felt as if he could read my mind.  
I felt as if he knew what I was thinking about him.  
About the smile at the end of the service. About how he must have resented the fact he had done everything my old man did, but none of it turned out the same way, how he must be bitter about what life had done to him. About how much better I had it, living for myself, my expensive watch, my nice apartment on the coast, my nightclubs and sexual exploits, my high paying job.

He looked up at me.

"It might not look it to you, but I wouldn't trade away a single thing in my life. I can honestly say that. I wouldn't change a thing."

"That's good."

My brother exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Can you say the same?"

"Sure."

"That might be true, and if it is, the reason why it's true for you isn't the same as why it's true for me. And that's the part you can't understand."

"I only wanted to ask how you were."

"You wanted me to complain about something or another, to bitch about Stacy, to tell you how disappointed I am in how things turned out, with the money, with Mary Pat. You wanted to hear me tell you things aren't easy, that I don't care for it. That I ain't happy with it."

"Well so what if you aren't?"

"Well so what if I am? What if I am happy with it? What if what you see ain't exactly what you think you see? What if I'm glad to be who I am, and I wouldn't trade a thing about it, because I've got more reason to wake up every day than I could ever know what to do with?"

"Then that's great."

"But it's not what you wanted to hear."

"What did I want to hear?"

"Ah, I know none of this suits you." He took a swig from his bottle of beer. "If you were eating lunch at Foltz's Deli every Saturday, wearing a ballcap, drinking with the boys, going to mass at St. Joe's, the grey skies and the loud women, the little kids, you'd go crazy. You hate it back here. You hate being here."

I smoked, thinking about the coast, the sunshine, the freeways and the palm trees and the pretty girls with their tan thighs. I had everything I wanted. I had money. I had friends. I had left the bleak winters, the concrete gridlock, the dying communities, the frosted basement windows and the tan brick buildings and the grime of the crosswalks for beaches, for sunshine, for good.

"I have my own life. I made my choices. You have your life, and I have mine. We're entitled to that."

"We are. We certainly are. And I'm damn proud of the ones I made."

"Should I not be proud of mine?"

"Who in the hell am I to say? It ain't my life."

I thought about how proud my father would be of my brother. A city worker. A parishioner. Wearing the same necktie every Christmas. The bench press and the baseball pennants.

My brother took another swig from his bottle of beer, then I did the same.

We smoked.

More cool air blew in from under the garage door.

He put his hand on my shoulder. "It would be nice to have you around more."

I put the cigar back to my mouth and chewed at it between my teeth.  
"Like you said, the place makes me crazy."

My brother squinted at me. "What about the people?"

I kept the cigar between my teeth.

I didn't say anything.

My brother set his cigar down in an ashtray on the workbench. He crossed his arms and his necktie was pulled loosely away from his collar.

Shadows cut in streaks across the milky yellow lamplight in the garage.

"I love to see you and Mary Pat and Stacy, I do. The fact I'm here now says all you need to know about how much you all mean to me. Family is everything. I wouldn't come back here for anything else. I hate it here. Being here. None of this is for me. None of it ever was. And we both know that."

A vacuum turned on inside the house. Stacy must be after the pine needles on the rug near the tree.

"I'm not Pops. I don't look down on you for it."

"Of course you do."

My brother uncrossed his arms.

He took a sip from his bottle of beer.

"That's not fair. And you know it. I've always had your back. You're my brother. Around here, family is everything. And you know what, Pops forgot that. He forgot his own lesson. But I didn't. And I never will."

My brother stood up from the couch. He left his cigar in the ashtray and set the beer bottle on the workbench. He turned and motioned for me to stand up.

I shook my head and chuckled.

My eyes were watering.

"Come on now. We ain't too big for a hug."

I stood up. I took the cigar out of my mouth and held it in my hand between my fingers. I held the beer bottle in the other hand.

My brother reached around me with both arms and hugged me.

As he hugged me, I was thinking about my brother's smile in the church. And I was thinking about the pastor's homily. And Mary Pat and her letter. I was thinking about my father. I was thinking about a scared little kid who wished more than anything in the world he could leave, and never come back.

Then I started to cry.

## **HOLIDAYS**

After a thing like that happens, what else is there to do?

When we opened the door to the house I expected the silence, but I wasn't prepared for it. That's what kept me from walking in. It was so damn quiet. The tree, the wrapped packages shining and decorated in red bows, the white lights strung around the staircase, the drawings of snowmen and gingerbread cookies on the refrigerator.

My husband and I had followed the detective in his Crown Victoria.

It was the day after Christmas.

I had noticed a red tail hawk up in the pines, driving past the reservoirs.

Death from above.

Startling, and beautiful.

They hadn't left like how a dead thing is supposed to die.

When a person dies, it's supposed to happen a certain way, passing from living to dead. And it hadn't happened like that.

I felt like an intruder discovered by the silence so the detective walked in first and then my husband and when my husband noticed I couldn't move any further he reached for my hand. I didn't put my hand out to his. I stayed behind at the door.

I must have fainted because I woke up on the couch, with my husband kneeled down, next to me, pressing a cold washcloth on my forehead.

It felt like I was falling through the sky.

I'll never forget the silence, and how it was, waking up on the couch. Maureen at the table complains about the airline flight, about the children in the row behind her, kicking at the back of her seat, screaming, making a mess of crackers and fruit snacks.

Maureen shows up every Sunday to complain about one thing or another.

While Maureen complains about the disruptions thanks to these children on her flight, while she was flying back to her husband Ted's family's for Christmas, I am confronted by the silence in my sister's house and how it felt to wake up falling through the sky.

I focus my eyes downward at the coffee mug in front of me.

The waitress had just been by and topped me off.

Janet and Kathy are patiently waiting for Maureen to finish. They probably aren't listening anyways.

My niece used to run to the door to greet us, hugging our knees, my husband and I, she would hug us and we would kiss her forehead and whenever we had to put on our coats to leave my niece would make us promise to come back.

"Promise you'll come back!"

We had been an uncle, and an aunt.

Now I am an old woman, a widow, with no family left.

My husband and I hadn't been able to have children of our own.

Maureen doesn't know anything about my sister or my niece or my brother-in-law, the car accident, the detective and the red Crown Victoria the day after Christmas all those years ago.

Maureen doesn't know how I felt when I woke up on the couch with my husband kneeeling next to me, but I can feel the quiet of the living room, the door to the house opening up to the silence, how it took my breath away and sent me falling through the sky.

Maureen makes a joke about next time she flies with Ted they plan to sneak a bottle of wine in her purse to survive whatever ordeal they'll have to face.

The bell on the entrance door to the diner jingles.

A little girl walks in with her mother and father.

#### **HOLE**

I had lost my way.

People at work knew it.

So when I returned after a six-week absence, I was surprised Frank approached me and asked about going out onto the ice. He was planning a fishing trip at the end of the month, but he didn't have anyone to partner with. A relative of his had some property up north, near the boundary waters, and every winter he made a trip to fish on the ice. You couldn't go out onto the lake all alone, so he asked if I would come along.

I felt my insides tighten, my skin warming, and I told him I didn't have any gear of my own.

"I have an extra pair of overalls for you."

The rest of the equipment he would provide, the lines and the lures and the bait and the augur and the sled. Frank had it all.

I was so tired, I was so dazed, I couldn't find another excuse. I resigned myself and grunted. I would go with him. When he let me be, I wondered if he was taking me out on the ice because he knew I had lost my way. I didn't know much about Frank. He grew up with three sisters. He had a wife and a son and a dog.

He didn't know much about me. I had a brother who I no longer spoke to. I had an apartment. I kept missing long stretches of work.

I figured Frank maybe thought it might help, he might help me, bringing me along with him to do some fishing.

I didn't know for sure but that's what I figured.

Frank showed up at my apartment with his truck. I opened up the door for him and looked down at his boots. He shook hands with me and asked if I had packed.

I pointed to a backpack on the ground. My boots were unlaced, next to the backpack, and I had my coat and my gloves on the couch.

I had tried to clean up the place but I still didn't want him walking around.

The medication hadn't been working.

The highs were too high, the lows too low.

He asked me if he could use the bathroom so I pointed to the door.

When he was done he came out, calmly looked me over, and said it was probably time to go.

"We'll want to make it up there before dark."

Outside I noted the augur in the truck bed along with piles fishing gear, a few cylinders of propane and a heater, some firewood, a sled and a few paper bags with groceries.

I asked if we were going to stop for any supplies.

"Marie packed us up some food for a couple of days, we should be alright. Junk food mostly. I have plenty of cigarettes. Water. Do you need anything else?"

I shook my head.

We drove out from my apartment, onto the highway where from the on-ramp you could just make out the top of Breakneck Hill. I had gone sledding down that hill with my brother. The hill looked smaller than how I remembered it.

We hadn't spoken much until Frank asked me a question.

"So what do you know about ice fishing?"

The truth was I didn't know much. I knew folks slept in ramshackle boxes on the shores of a lake, or even sometimes out on the ice itself. I knew you drilled through the ice with the augur, set down your lines, and waited. I knew most guys used fishing as an excuse to go drinking, to get drunk with their buddies and leave behind their wives and the mortgage payments and the kids' schedules.

I didn't have any of those things to run away from.

The only thing that I had, there was no running.

Frank explained how at this point in the season, because of how the fish behaved, we would have to drill further out from the shore. It would be more dangerous that way, but we would be careful. The walleye start in close to the shore, then move their way out as the season goes on. We might even stumble onto northern pike if we were lucky. State regulations said you could fish two holes a man, one hole you work with a jig, and the other you leave alone, a dead stick.

His words hung in between my ears, dead stick.

Frank had gone ice fishing with his uncle and his father, but now they were too old to brave the ice. He knew the right techniques, how to set the bait, how to flick the rod, then let it sit, how to shake the rod, then reel it up from the bottom. Minnows, spoons, lures and steel lines. He had everything we would need to make an honest go at it.

I nodded as he spoke. I tried to listen, to make sense of it, but I was mostly in a daze. His words came out of his mouth in a syrupy consistency. I felt like there were clouds in my head.

The medication wasn't working.

When we were far enough north, he pulled off the highway, and it was backroads until we reached the property. We took a dirt path for about two miles until we hit a lakeshore. Frank took it slow with the truck and I could tell he was excited because he seemed to be talking through his teeth.

"Should be right over here."

Finally, he pointed out the shack.

"Ain't exactly the honeymoon suite, but it'll make for a decent home the next couple nights."

I wondered if Frank would try to save me, if he was saved himself. Folks liked to sell you Jesus out in the country, out in the wilderness, where it was dark and the silence overwhelmed your senses. I wondered if he had simply taken me as a drinking buddy, an accomplice, but I hadn't noticed any cans of beer in the truck bed.

"How about we unpack, start a fire, and fix some supper? I got a dozen hot dogs and some cans of spaghetti. Potato chips, too. Need some crunch."

I nodded my head.

I didn't know Frank very well. He didn't know me. I had once expressed an interest in going fishing with him, a couple of years ago, when I had first joined the electric company and acted friendly towards everyone at the district office. He must have remembered.

We unpacked the gear in the shack. Frank started a fire outside in a pit, after he cleared away several inches of snow, and I set out my sleeping bag and a blanket on one of the cots. Frank told me it would be better if we waited on using the heater, we should be alright with the cans of propane he brought but it was better to only use it when you needed it.

I came out of the cabin and the fire was going good.

Frank knelt down and was blowing into the pile of wood.

"Quiet out here, isn't it?"

Frank told me about the red-eye'd loons that would yodel from one bank of the lake to the other, then go streaking with their flippers across the surface of the water in the summertime. His uncle owned almost a hundred acres, and he had a deal with the Department of Forestry, as long as he didn't develop the land any they would take care of the trees and let him hunt whatever he pleased. His uncle enjoyed hunting and would set up blinds along the lakeshore in the spring, and in the fall he would bag deer, sometimes even a moose.

The moon was nearly full and the fire was going good.

Frank put a steel grate across one section of coals and then set down a large cast iron skillet. He tossed on several hot dogs, then opened a can of spaghetti. The spaghetti began to slowly bubble, with big lazy bubbles at first, then faster, smaller bubbles.

I realized how hungry I was.

I hadn't eaten anything all day.

I looked over across the lake, and nearby I noticed a shadow from a birch tree, moving slowly in the breeze. It hadn't been a windy evening, but there had been enough to animate the naked branches of the tree into a moonglow shadow. The lake was a sparkling carpet of crystal, purple almost, glittering, but next to me stood this menacing torment of sinew, a nightmare of ancient hunger.

It was so quiet out next to the fire, with the tinder crackling.

Frank handed me a plate of food and I thanked him.

I tried not to think about the tree as I exhaled and removed my gloves. The spoon was cold in my hand, but I put the bowl to my face and I could feel the heat against my nose.

Frank put another log on the fire, then he fixed himself a bowl. Before he began eating, he raised his spoon in my direction.

"Glad to have you here, partner."

So there was no grace, no Jesus talk or hope for the holy spirit coming. Why had he brought me here?

We ate mostly without conversation and I forgot about the shadows of birch branches and the awful silence. The food warmed me up. Frank set the rest of the hotdogs from the pouch onto the cast iron, then another can of spaghetti, and we each enjoyed a second helping.

I poured extra potato chips into my bowl.

Frank offered me a cigarette, and we smoked as the fire continued.

"Nothing beats a warm supper on a cold night."

He was talking through his teeth again. I could tell he was happy. This place made him happy. Doing this, the fire, the cast iron, the lake, the shack- he was content with his life.

I didn't feel jealous against him, but as I threw my cigarette butt into the fire, I wished I could have felt the same way.

I felt like all I had been doing was collecting shadows.

Frank told me it was too late to drill or set any lines, so it was best to get some shuteye and make an early go of it. We waited until the warmth of the fire was no match against the cold from the air and the snow underfoot, and as the coals radiated and melted in a pool of oranges and reds, we headed into the small cabin.

"You play cards?"

I told him I didn't have any money to gamble, and then he chuckled.

"Me neither. I'm only talking for fun. You know Spit?"

He explained the game. Twenty cards to a man, five in your hand at a time and fifteen to start in your draw pile. Two cards face up in the middle, the build piles, and then five cards on either side of the face cards in case neither player could force any action. The object was to discard everything in your pile by playing off the face cards, up or down. Aces could play off kings or twos. And the house rule was the Queen of Hearts could play off anything.

Frank set down a crate between the cots and dealt the cards.

We had already set up the propane heater, but neither of us had taken off our boots or our caps.

Frank won the first game.

Then the second.

Then the third.

He offered me a cigarette from his pack and I took it. He was talking through his teeth again. He said it might snow a bit tonight, but the weather should be clear tomorrow. We could fish all day, and Sunday if we wanted.

I nodded and smoked.

We played another game of Spit.

Then another.

I fought back the daze, and I could feel my heart pounding. I made up my mind to win the next game.

"You want to go one more?"

Frank smoked his cigarette and dealt the cards.

After a while, we were down to three cards each. I had a good idea of what he had in his hand. Once I laid down my seven, on top of the eight, he would lay down a six. We both had a five. It was against the rules to lay down a pair of cards, two at the same time, so I would have to beat his five with mine once he dropped the six down.

"I got there first, partner."

I shook my head. My five rested on top of his five.

"It was mine. You played it too early."

I shook my head again. He had cheated. It was against the rules to lay down two cards at a time.

Frank shrugged his shoulders, then he picked his five up from under mine. We drew from the deck, because neither of us could play from our hand, and the Queen of Hearts appeared face up.

I threw down my final card and spit on the ground.

"Nice to see some fight in you, partner."

I looked at Frank. A battery powered lantern hung above us from a hook on the ceiling of the shack. He had blue eyes and a grin on his face as he held on to his remaining cards. I didn't know how to respond. I was angry. I was frustrated. I wanted to grab him by the collar, even though I had won.

"What in the hell did you bring me here for?"

It burst out from me, from the fog, without me having the chance to hold it in.

The cabin was quiet. Hardly any wind stirred outside, and the only noise came from the propane heater.

Frank sat up on his cot and began to unlace his boots.

"We lost a little girl, a couple years before you joined up with the company. She was two. Cancer. Most of the guys at the office knew me because of what happened to my daughter. I was the poor bastard who lost a kid to cancer. But when you joined up, you didn't know it about me, and you treated me the same as everyone else. I liked that about you. I liked knowing you. I liked not having to talk about my daughter, or think about her when we spoke, because it wasn't on your mind. It was on everyone's mind all the time, and I was worn out from it. We had a hard go with it, my wife and me. It took a while to come out the other end. When my daughter passed, Sarah, it was a couple weeks after her birthday. There were still balloons in the house, tied to the chairs. A golden '2' balloon, drooping near the floor of the kitchen, for weeks and weeks. I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. But one day, maybe a month after the funeral, I finally cut the tie and punctured the mylar foil and put it all in the trash. I took that balloon down and then I started to piece myself back together. It took a while to come out the other end, but we managed."

Frank handed me a cigarette and then lit one of his own.

We weren't out here to get drunk or talk about Jesus.

We were out here to fish.

#### **LA PARADISE**

First, it was one thing, and then another.

The microwave broke down.

A recall had been issued on the car radiator.

The taxes were coming due.

Another one of our children had come down with the flu.

Black ice on the driveway.

Rotten bananas on the kitchen counter.

One thing, and then another.

I had taken the job because I had no other choice. I was out of work, and after my brother called me, I didn't have a choice. The money was too good. The work was too easy.

When I flew out to start, I stayed for a week at the Grand Hotel. It was at the insistence of my new boss. Plus, the company footed the bill. There was a full breakfast in the morning. The maids cleaned up the room and made the bed.

I would sit on a pink sofa in the lounge, surrounded by silvers and maroons, angular mosaics of tile decorating the walls, triangles and rectangles forming a geometric labyrinth, marble columns, gold trim work, and that wire steel globe perched on a wooden pedestal- unapologetically art deco, and charming.

When I first met her, I was finishing a drink and she was wearing red leather pants.

They say a woman is never as beautiful as the first moment you make eyes on her. She was absentmindedly eating an Avelines chocolate, wearing red leather pants.

When she took off her blouse, in her bedroom, she smiled and whispered, "Voila."

When the waiter appeared with the bacon and eggs at breakfast, in the dining room with the green and red floral wallpaper, the golden oak leaves woven into the carpets, he pronounced, "Voila."

When my boss showed me my office, with a window view of the Alps, he exclaimed, "Voila."

At the table, after I doubled down on a hard eleven then drew a Queen of Diamonds, the dealer smacked his lips, "Voila."

The first week had been nothing but "Voila."

I noticed a sign, on the way to the Hotel Le Beauregard, which read AVNACEZ JUSQU'AU FEU.

I figured it meant 'Proceed with Caution.'

It was an easy decision for the company owner, after my brother resigned, after my brother told him about his twin, in the same line of work, the same hard-nosed approach and work-ethic.

My brother had told me the owner was an insane and superstitious man who trusted no one. The job would be mine if I wanted it, and I'd be a fool to turn it down. Over the phone, laughing to himself, he remarked, "You'll fulfill his spiritual needs."

After work I would walk down the Rue du Temple, into town, then I'd turn towards the Casino for dinner and a few hands of Blackjack.

I couldn't stop thinking about her.

I missed the tiny folio with the bill for breakfast, at the Grand Hotel, the shiny gold embossing. I missed the banisters of the staircases, the octagonal windows at each floor's landing with the intricate frames and overlays, the embroidered doors with their brown buttons and satin padded cushions, the fresh geraniums in the vases, the picture of the Place Bellecour in Lyon framed in gold.

My wife called me, after the first week, and told me about the ultrasound. She said the baby's heartbeat was like a hummingbird. I didn't know if that was good or bad so I asked her. She wasn't happy that I didn't know. Now we have three children, and the youngest is sick.

The microwave is broken.

There is a recall out on the car radiator.

Black ice on the driveway.

Rotten bananas on the kitchen counter.

We live in France and I work in Switzerland and my wife misses the States, but the money is too good.

I never saw the woman again.

I drank wine at the Hotel Le Beauregard because I had to pay my way after that first week. A parrot with red, yellow and blue feathers decorated the sign for the hotel out on the street. I sat at my window, watching the empty sidewalks. I quit playing Blackjack at the Casino after a hard run of cards. Finally, after nearly two months, I met my wife at the airport and we moved our belongings into an apartment in the quiet, provincial town.

After I took her bag and hugged her, at the Arrivals Gate, she handed me a picture from her most recent ultrasound, a black and white image, blurry, almost like a fossil embedded in stone, grays and whites and black, a human skull, a small nose above the tiniest of lips, a sloping forehead, shadows and light.

I didn't know if what I was looking at was good or bad, but I didn't ask.

It's been three years in France, and my French isn't very strong. I don't blink at the Alps anymore. That first morning, with the blue crags jutting up into the crackling morning sky of pink and orange, the earth and heavens, I couldn't help but stare out the window while the car service transported me to the office. My mouth must have hung open. A line of peaks, changing color, frozen up there in the erupting atmosphere. But now, I don't bother to look.

I do, however, catch myself looking up at the balconies of the Grand Hotel. The birdwire and the ashtrays on the small tables fill me with a disconsolate feeling, but I can't help but looking up whenever I pass. I scan the balconies. I look for smoke. A woman wearing red leather pants.

My boss is superstitious, and insane, but he trusts me implicitly.

It's not the work, though.

It's been one thing, and then another.

I've made a lot of mistakes.

But I'm not sure she was one of them.

"Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner."

It's a French saying.

## **BREAKFAST**

"Let's go to Rosie's for breakfast, tomorrow."

They had been talking for hours. It was the end of a long conversation. But this wasn't how she expected it to end.

"What?"

"Let's go have breakfast as a family. For the kids. So they can have one last memory, one last time, before we have to go through with everything." She was deciding on whether she had the energy to fight him on another point. She certainly didn't have any patience left to explain what they had to "go through" was all because of him, his decisions, his poor choices.

She was exhausted, with her back leaning up against the headboard. She never considered whether it would be for the better, if anything good could come from it, one last time.

Whenever the kids would disagree over something, what toppings to choose for a pizza order, or what movie to watch, or what seat in the car they would sit in, lately they would turn to rock-paper-scissors in order to sort out the decision.

She considered rock-paper-scissors.

Of course it would be ridiculous.

But wasn't all of it ridiculous, already?

She was thinking about how ridiculous the whole thing was, so she didn't respond to his question.

His mind was occupied with his daughter, pigtails bounding into the bedroom to greet him as the morning broke open, as the day began, with her arms wide and a toothy smile on her face between her bright pink cheeks. She knows my heart, inside and out. He was hoping that one day she would forgive him for all this, for what had to happen, but it would take a long time. He was thinking how it would all start tomorrow, the long process of her forgiving him, and how long it would feel. He wanted one more morning with her, with a hug, with a stack of pancakes and butter, before everything would change.

His wife couldn't muster up any sort of opposition, and finding little opposition, she gave in to his request.

"Alright."

He nearly smiled.

After hours of her repeated dismissings, one after another, as he offered up explanations and alternatives, she had given in.

"Thank you."

Her husband woke up on the living room couch and after their faces were washed and their socks were pulled up they headed to breakfast as a family, at the cafe off Lilac Street. They ordered pancakes and waffles and scrambled eggs and chocolate milk while the waitress chewed gum and steam from the coffee danced above the mugs.

He couldn't bear the thought of having to leave when the check showed up on the table in front of him.

His wife was helping her daughter put on a coat, and turned to him, staring at him firmly.

It was all over for them.

After the little girl had grown up some, she would look back and remember the breakfast at the cafe, she would remember their last moments as a family, how happy they had been, her mother and father. She would look back and remember the pancakes and the butter, the waitress with her pen stuck in a tied-up bun of mousy brown hair behind her head. Then she would think of the fights, the screaming and yelling, the kitchen utensils flying into the living room, a table unexpectedly flipped over onto its side.

She would be thinking about love.

The little girl who had grown up some would be crying and thinking about love, about what it meant to be in love, and if it mattered, whether or not you said it.

She would be wondering why don't we consider the sun saying 'I love you' to the leaves on the trees when it shines, or the animals saying 'I love you' when they spill their blood to satiate our appetites, or the sky saying 'I love you' when the rains fall to the earth onto the rows of crops, or how the moon says 'I love you' on a cold winter night, because many forms of love exist, and perhaps these voiceless ways of love are the simplest, the truest, and more perfect than anything people can express in words.

The little girl who had grown up some would be waiting on a boy to tell her he loved her.

"It's not going to fix anything."

"I know."

### **BLIZZARD**

When Joseph forgave his brothers, when they knelt before him in entreaty, ready to be punished or killed or sold into slavery, he explained to them even though they had intended to do him harm, to do evil, all those years ago when they abandoned him, God had allowed their sin to happen so that a greater good could be accomplished, namely the thousands of people who were saved during Egypt's famine because of Joseph's foresight to stockpile mountains of grain.

Lydia is thinking about the story of Joseph forgiving his eleven brothers, from the Bible.

She doesn't attend church or even think to pray before she lays herself down to bed but Lydia is finished shoveling snow for the morning and thinking about the story of how Joseph forgave his brothers, from Genesis. Lydia's father, who was a minister, told the story to her, often, and among other stories, like Ruth, Esther, and the Blessed Mother Mary. But the story of Joseph stands out to her, this morning, a story which helps explain why God doesn't work in ways we might expect, or how we might prefer Him to.

The snowbanks are several feet high, in some sections, taller than she is standing.

Her worn Danner boots are on the mat next to the front door.

Her retriever, Duke, is asleep by the wood stove.

The wind continues to drift piles up against the walls and the corners of the cabin.

Lydia had shoveled for nearly three hours last night, and another hour this morning. Most of the drive is cleared, the approach to the property, the cut-out section of forest where her cabin and shed are located. The snowblower engine failed on her last week, after the first blizzard of the season. Unfortunately the hardware store in town didn't have the necessary replacement part, and because of the weather, it wasn't due to ship until later this week.

This is the second blizzard of the season.

Lydia sips a mug of coffee. Her face is a feeling of numbness, of cheeks and nose, and even jaws and lips, defined more so by what she cannot feel, as if her countenance had been erased during her work, and was now slowly returning.

She thinks to herself, is there a better cup of coffee than after a morning of shoveling snow?

The wind chill, the icicles on the gutters, the glimmering flakes, they all contribute to her sense of satisfaction.

Sharpened, despite the numbness.

Purified almost.

She had been careful to toss the loads from the shovel towards the lee side of the drive, and not towards the weather side.

The coffee warms her mouth, her chest.

Snow is in the forecast later this week, snow and continued, bitter cold. It doesn't bother her any.

Lydia had noticed a kestrel at the edge of the meadow clearing, auburn and grey, speckled in black, perched on one of the lowest branches of a white pine. And the ash tree near the house was littered with lady Cardinals, their breasts and beaks silhouetted against an impossibly blue sky. She admired the birds with a slight grin before she opened the door to the cabin and shook off her bones, her boots.

Home, inside the cabin.

She thinks back to last night, when she cut the shovel into the edge of the drive and turned towards the forest. In front of her, shadows of snowflakes, a barrage of specks illuminated by the flood light attached to the cabin, a grueling silence, and the tiny shadows against the uncleared ground, smooth and sparkling, the faint glow from the flood light. Despite the wind, a silence which permeated everything.

Tracks across the back yard, evidence of a fox scudding about.

Lydia had stopped to contemplate the shadows and the sparkles and the silence, and in doing so, she heard her father's voice, the preacher, recanting the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers, of why we can't understand God's plan until long after the fact.

It's not for me to understand.

She can feel the blood rushing back into her capillary beds.

She reaches for the urn and pours another cup.

It's not for me to understand.

She looks out the window from her humble kitchen towards the east, the sun, the ash tree and the lady Cardinals.

A series of images begin to flood over her. A motel in Manila, notorious for prostitution, named THE PINK CLOUD INN. Outside the building, in red paint, below the balconies, painted letters forming the declaration JESUS CHRIST IS THE LORD. Air condition units, defunct and useless, precariously jutting out from the windows. Countless electrical wires and telephone lines and cables of all sorts run in a tangled web from the pole at the corner where the motel stands, connecting and relaying in every direction.

It's what Lydia remembered most, the tangled mess of wires. Not the slapdash bedroom or the police captain who suspected foul play, not the shriveled motel clerk without any teeth wearing a clear green visor like he was a casino dealer.

The American Embassy was supposed to follow up with her, but it had been several months.

Lydia had lost her appetite for justice or answers.

She is watching the birds in the ash tree, thinking about the Book of Genesis, her son, and why the reasons behind God allowing young men to be murdered in motel rooms in Manila aren't for her to understand.

Lydia turns back to Duke at the fire.

She'll add a new log to the wood burning stove.

She'll brew another pot of coffee and light a cigarette.

She'll put a tape into the cassette player, and listen to piano music, because the hammers seem to ring more crisply in the winter.

It's not for me to understand.

Outside, as the sun continues upward, branches of the trees shine in dollops of crystal and powder. Long shadows cast against the white sheet of the meadow. The college of lady Cardinals flushes towards another tree. The kestrel hunts. And somewhere in Manila, on the other end of the world, a young woman will decide to walk out of THE PINK CLOUD INN for good and earnestly care for the baby growing inside of her belly.

#### **GRIST**

She tilts her head and sighs because his car is in the carport next to the apartment building with a mound of snow piled behind it.

"Dad, you have to clear out your car."

She says it to him after she opens the door with her spare key, kicking off her books, shaking off her blonde hair, her bangs on her forehead. She'd like to cut her bangs, but she has acne above her eyebrows.

"Dad!"

The television is on, and he's sitting with his feet up on a reclining sofa chair.

"Howdy darlin'."

"Your car is covered in snow."

"I know it."

"The blizzard was two weeks ago. We were supposed to go to the mall today, remember?"

"I know it."

During Christmas, she flipped through photo albums at her mother's apartment, looking back on pictures when she was only a newborn, a toddler, a little girl, when he was so much younger looking, happier. Her mother stated openly she didn't know what was wrong with him, what had happened.

She walks over to the television and flips the switch.

"Come on, let's go."

"Wish I could, Ricki, but I just can't. Not today."

Her father's name was Ulysses before they started calling him Mountain. Since he had been a boxer and a personality and somebody to know, somebody to be known by, since he had won his first bout, he hadn't gone by his given name. Even his former wife knew him as Mountain.

But now everything had changed, including his name.

Nobody called him Mountain anymore.

And he'd never been known to them as Ulysses.

"Dad, you should see a doctor. You need help."

He looked up from the reclining sofa chair at his fourteen-year-old daughter with his eyebrows arched as high as he could muster.

Her mother came up with the name Veronica but he had called her Ricki for short, a nickname between them, all the way back the moment he met his daughter in the hospital. Ricki knew how to jab twice then send a cross. She knew the importance of a cold beer. She knew how to say what was on your mind when it was on your mind and to say it loud.

"What are ya talking about Ricki?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Look at you, Dad."

Ulysses the former middleweight looked down at the paunch of his gut, his stomach. He looked at his socks. He looked at his dirty fingernails. He's looking over himself and he knows his daughter is right, she's right about him being in trouble, needing help.

He's no longer Mountain.

He's been lost since the boxing commission revoked his license.

He's been in the shadows, without a name to be called back by.

"Listen Ricki, I'll take ya to the mall next week. Let's order a pizza or something. Turn the television back on, will ya?"

Ricki doesn't turn the television back on.

"Dad."

He sighs. He's an old man, a broken man, and he's barely forty.

He's not an old man, but something inside of him feels like it's near the end.

She can sense it inside of him.

She had once asked him, as a precocious young seven-year-old, she remembers asking him about his cornerman, his trainer, Timmy Chisholm, about what Timmy used to say between rounds, and her daddy told her how Timmy Chisholm used to hype him up, tell him he was the greatest boxer that every lived, that no one could knock him down, that only he could beat himself.

She understands the importance of a strong cornerman.

She's seen how her mother treats him, how the promoters treated him, how the fans and the folks in the neighborhood treated him when he left the sport.

"They never knocked you out in the ring. Why let them do it in real life?"

Ulysses can't breathe.

It's like the feeling of being punched in the gut, but it's different. It's worse.

But it's better.

He couldn't believe somebody could love him like that again.

Like the way Timmy Chisolm used to, in the seventh round, when it was knockout or bust, when the scorecards were against him, when the crowd was anxious, when he didn't know how much was left in the tank.

Ulysses clicks the lever to move upright in the reclining sofa chair.

He stands up.

His fists seem to blink.

#### **NEW ENGLAND**

When she asked me I thought of twilight peaches and blues sparkling like cotton candy, a sky of dappled clouds electric with light, a golden hour, the evening hour of October, the hour of football practice fields erupting with snouts of breath, the physics of appreciation, a day accomplished and a dream realized, scattered oak leaves serred and crumpled with rain, the sublime twilight.

When she asked me I thought of dawn, lavender fogs rolling spectral across the mountain valleys, the sunlight leeching back out from the ground and coagulating in a blanket around Bolton Flats, overnight windchills combined with moisture on the meadows of cattails and grasses, the silence of a true morning greeting, of hoarfrost and reverence.

When she asked me I thought of smoke from the brick chimneys at the mill, a smoldering pipe bowl, my father and his newspaper, the smell of burnt coffee and bacon, my mother in an apron with her red wool scarf around her neck because you could only push the boiler so hard that time of year.

When she asked me I thought of the Mendehlsonn family at Bob's Country Kitchen, with their son Billy, he couldn't speak or understand what was spoken to him but his mother and father would bunch him up between their shoulders protecting him from a strange world of syllables and paragraphs so he could enjoy a plate of French toast for dinner every Friday night, and a slice of chocolate mousse pie.

When she asked me I thought of the Apple Butter Festival, white picket fences and bunting, firecracker pops from down the block and after you saw the wick was lit you'd throw the damn thing as far as you could and break like hell for it as fast as your legs would carry you, relieved to hear your mother curse you for tracking in so much mud.

When she asked me I thought of the church's music director, opening the arch framed door underneath the steeple, in the center of town, flipping the switch to the organ excited with anticipation, the empty pews and

the sunlight illuminating the stained glass windows, the dove, the peace, for almost an hour the space would be empty of any congregations or readings or doughnuts yet the worship would be perfect and complete. When she asked me I thought of those stubborn geese at the boulevards' intersection, a little girl with her head out the back seat window, pleased and counting the column of fowl.

When she asked me I thought of the kid at the dock who had started his own private charter, the tightlines and the spray of saltwater on deck, how we hadn't gotten a bite, we needed a bite, the captain who was a kid he said he'd never gone out without a single bite and we hadn't seen so much as a nibble, we needed a bite.

When she asked me I couldn't believe how much came back all at once, piles of whirlybirds at the edge of the grass, how clear it felt, how it all made sense together in my head though I would never be able to respond to her question.

When she asked me I realized I was more of a place, I was more of a place than a person and the feeling reminded me of a Steinbeck line about a song, a song that was the people, how the song was all of the people, and I think I finally understood what Steinbeck might have been trying to get at.

When she asked me I was in a hospice center dying and she had been volunteering so she sat by my bedside and she asked me about who I was, what was my name, where had I grown up, and it was polite conversation and she was only trying to put me at ease, distract me I suppose, but when she asked me I realized there was more to me than this body, and it wasn't so bad to die because things keep going on beyond us and beyond our life so even though I could only smile at her I'm sure she sensed everything was alright when I died that afternoon.

#### **BLACK TOUPEE**

"Say Andy, did you lose a bet?"

The boys were laughing at him, but he didn't care.

Andy had finally caught a route which would take him back to Upstate New York.

It had been months and months hassling Old Man Wilcott's boy, Dan Wilcott, the new owner of the company, to book him on a coast to coast job. The toupee had cost him a pretty penny, but nothing compared to the teeth, the veneers.

The teeth had cost Andy a fortune.

It didn't feel right to wear a mustache any longer, seeing that it was almost entirely white, seeing that all his facial hair had lost their color. Andy shaved his mustache shortly after he started wearing the toupee.

The boys were laughing and Andy thought maybe he should have waited, to shave his mustache, to start wearing the toupee with the jet black hair, but he figured he might as well start getting used to it.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection off from one of the soda machines in the office.

It didn't matter. He was headed back east, and he'd be able to stop off in the Finger Lakes, in Ithaca, at State Diner, where he'd met her, where he'd asked the question, "What would you say it would take for you to jump up in the cab with me and come back to Washington?"

Andy had been half joking with the question, but like every joke, like every question asked with a smile and a feeling of anticipation, a serious truth rested at its core.

Andy had fallen for a waitress, ten or fifteen years younger than him. Love at first sight.

He hadn't expected her to answer.

When she replied, "You'd have to have jet black hair and a perfect smile," joking in return, he figured there was a truth to what she had said.

He took this truth seriously.

He saved up for the next nine months and paid to have his teeth repaired. Then he saved up for another three months and paid for an expensive toupee with jet black hair.

Now he was pointed back towards Ithaca, the State Diner.

Andy hadn't told anyone about his plans. He had a wife, two daughters both grown up, a dog, a few buddies from the neighborhood, and whenever any of them asked about his teeth, or his hair, he remained unassuming. Andy had been an unassuming person most of his life. He prevaricated, explaining how he had always wanted good teeth. He told them he was tired of his mustache, his grey hair. His wife was concerned at first, but she began to forget about it. Andy was hardly home. He was an overnight hauler, a man with a rig, he worked nights and weekends and holidays and she was used to him being away, out of her mind. His daughters had their own lives to worry about. His friends, they kidded and joked but nobody pressed him much further than that.

It had been a long time since he was nervous on a job.

The drive east seemed to go on forever.

He pushed the miles.

He pressed the pace.

After he burned past Chicago, he really started to sweat. He would check his reflection in the mirror. He would adjust the toupee on his head. He'd rub at the rough patch of skin under his nose, above his lip.

A state trooper gave him a spook near Toledo.

He dropped off the load in Albany, signed the paperwork, and phoned home. He told his wife he missed her, it had been a long route, but he was excited to be headed back home. He was picking up in Erie, and then he'd be on his way towards the west. He asked about the dogs, then the girls. The dogs barked at him when he first put on the wig.

He didn't like thinking of it as a wig, but that's what it was.

Andy hung up the phone, at peace with the fact he may never speak to his wife again.

Then it was on to Ithaca, another three hours.

The diner was open seven days a week, sixteen hours a day.

He'd be there once for lunch.

She'd been on a double shift when he met her, when he fell in love.

There was a chance she might not be working, but he figured he would deal with whatever came his way.

Before he split from off of US-88, a coyote appeared on the roadside, dead and caved in, splattered in blood, the heartbreak of it.

Its body had fallen underneath a sign, WATCH FOR DEER.

Andy was nervous.

He parked his rig a few blocks away in an abandoned lot and walked up to the stoic door at the entrance. The sky was grey, and puddles littered the sidewalk.

He couldn't feel the drizzle of rain on his head.

He sat down at the counter and waited.

At first, she didn't recognize him. She poured coffee and handed him a laminated menu without offering much eye contact.

She brought him a turkey club with a side of French fries.

She refilled his Diet Coke.

Her gestures and manners were cold and efficient, almost irreverent.

Andy was faceless. He was invisible. An anonymous man at the counter.

Unassuming.

The check was underneath his sweaty palm before he choked up the nerve, before she turned to set the coffee urn back on the burner, facing his direction as he coughed.

"I did exactly how you asked, you know."

"Pardon?"

"My hair is black. My teeth are perfect."

The waitress looked at him kind of funny. She was used to small talk, to jokes, to making the customers feel comfortable, but his words caught her off guard. She glanced at a ketchup bottle. She was about to decide whether or not to replace it.

"So why don't you come back to Washington with me?"

She finally looked up at him.

"Do I know you?"

"You told me if I showed up with jet black hair and brand-new teeth, you'd come home to Washington with me."

A silence like a kind of treachery filled the quiet diner, overwhelming everything, the plates and the dishwasher and the radio programming, it swallowed up the waitress and Andy and the other patrons.

The waitress' face darkened.

"You must be mistaken me for somebody else."

Andy softly chuckled then made a clicking noise in the corner of his mouth.

"It was in this diner, nearly a year ago. I asked you what it would take to get you to come back with me, in my cab, back west, and you told me it would take jet black hair and brand-new teeth."

"I'm sorry, you must be mistaken."

Andy didn't know how to react. His was a pacific disposition, and it had been for all of his life, for everything he could remember about himself. He had never really once been angry. Frustrated, sad, hopeless. But never angry.

"Can you please try and remember?"

He tapped his knuckles on the counter.

The waitress didn't know what to say. Her voice stood up straight. "I'm sorry sir, but, I'm, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Andy opened his wallet and left a bill on top of the paper check to cover up the scribbles and figures in red ink.

The waitress held her breath.